Letter from Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, J. Colville, to Private Secretary to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, C. Shuckburgh, 27 July 1953

My dear Shuckburgh,

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were discussing today the meaning of the recent events in Russia. During the course of this conversation Mr. Eden said that he thought events in Georgia throw some light on the matter. It appeared that after Stalin died men of more moderate views replaced the previous rulers of Georgia, but that after the fall of Beria the moderate men were thrown out and the more extreme Communists returned to power[[1]](#footnote-1). It would be interesting to know whether there has been a similar trend in Hungary. It rather looks as if, perhaps in accordance with Beria’s policy, Rakosi was in eclipse for a time and more liberal measures were proposed. With the fall of Beria it seems that Rakosi’s successor, Nagy[[2]](#footnote-2), was forced to make way once again for his predecessor and that the promised alleviations were cancelled. Rakosi himself appears now to be back in the forefront of the picture.

Would you let me know whether the Department bear out this interpretation, as far as Hungary is concerned, and whether they think it has any connection with events in Russia.

Yours ever,

Colville

ENDS

Georgia

Georgia has been a key point in the Beria affair because of Beria’s Georgian nationality and connections and because Georgia, owing to its geography and the independent national temperament, has never been very amenable to the policies of the central Government.

The trouble in Georgia began in 1951, when the central Government apparently determined to clean up the administration. The Georgian addiction to private enterprise seems to have led the local Party bosses to deviate very considerably from Communist policies, so much so that they were later accused of “creating principalities” for themselves.[[3]](#footnote-3) At this time the Georgian administration still consisted mainly of those who had been Beria’s colleagues when he was First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party before he took over the central security apparatus in 1938. It is these people, held responsible for the universal “corruption” in Georgia, who have been steadily removed in the successive local Government upheavals since 1951. Beria, who carried out central directives while Stalin was alive (he personally supervised the second round in 1952), seems to have used his position to let his old associates off as lightly as he could. In the third upheaval, immediately after Stalin’s death, he was able to bring back some of those previously downgraded or removed and to install his protégé Dekanozov as Minister of Internal Affairs. It looks, indeed, as if Beria, who had for many years ranked second only to Stalin in Georgia, set about consolidating his “principality” there, doubtless with an eye to the struggle for power which was developing behind the scenes in Moscow. After Beria’s fall, the central Government are trying to reassert their authority and proceeding to remove the rest of Beria’s protégés. His activities therefore do give some substance to the charges against him of encouraging nationalism, obstructing agricultural policy (which had been consistently violated in Georgia), restoring capitalism (to which Georgians are naturally inclined) and setting himself and the M.V.D. above the State. At all events Great Russians now seem to be more firmly in the saddle in Moscow.

This analysis is speculative and the evidence does not by any means all fall into place. Events in Georgia should not necessarily be taken as a parallel for developments elsewhere in the Soviet Union or in the orbit.

Hungary

In Hungary, as in East Germany, policies seem to have counted for more than personalities. The economic situation undoubtedly demanded something on the lines of the new programme if a breakdown were to be avoided. Although Rakosi stepped out of the Government altogether, he retained the leading position in the Party, and it was he who apparently brought the new directives back from Moscow in the first place. The new policy was not announced till July 4 and we are pretty sure that Beria was arrested by June 27; this is not conclusive, but there would have been time to countermand or modify Nagy’s announcement had Beria’s fall affected it. We have no evidence that any of those who lost their Government jobs have been executed or imprisoned; other jobs seem to have been found for nearly all of them. The reshuffle was no doubt intended to facilitate the execution of the new policy and give the Hungarian people an earnest of a real change; Rakosi retired behind the scenes, perhaps in accordance with the new preference for “collective leadership”, but he does not yet seem to have suffered any real loss of influence. He had to administer a cold douche in his speech of July 11 because the Hungarian people had evidently shown signs of taking the new policies too literally; but we have had no reason since to suppose that their general intention has been reversed. It has just been reported, for example, that Cardinal Mindszenthy[[4]](#footnote-4) has been released from prison and put under house arrest and that certain religious observances are to be permitted again.

There is therefore nothing to suggest that the events in Hungary had any direct connexion with the struggle for power in the Soviet Union except insofar as they have contributed to the general lowering of tension which Soviet internal preoccupations will no doubt continue to demand.

[TNA, FO 371/106517]

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1. After the death of I.V. Stalin, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, A.I. Mgeladze was removed from his post and substituted for the Beria loyalist A.I. Mirtskhulava. He, in his turn, was removed from his post in September 1953. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nagy, Imre (1896–1958) – Hungarian political figure, on 13 June 1953 he was appointed Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Hungarian People’s Republic while Matyas Rakosi clung to power as General Secretary of the Communist Party of Hungary. This step was conditional upon the changes in the nature of leadership in the Soviet Union following Stalin’s death. Nagy was an advocate of a “New Course” for the Hungarian economy with a stress on developing light industry, but also on collective leadership. During the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, he took the side of those in the uprising. He was sentenced to death for high treason in 1958. See: Stykalin А.S. Vostochnaia Evropa v sisteme otnoshenii Vostok-Zapad (1953 – nachalo 1960-kh gg.) // Kholodnaia voina. 1945—1963 gg. Istoricheskaia retrospektiva. М., 2003. S. 488-490. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This refers to the so-called Mingrelian Affair that began in November 1951. It was directed at protégés of L.P. Beria occupying various state and party posts who were accused of corruption. The affair was supervised by A.I. Mgeladze but subject to I.V. Stalin’s direction. See: Khlevniuk О.V., Gorlitskii I. Kholodnyi mir: Stalin i zavershenie stalinskoi diktatury. М., 2011. S. 13640. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cardinal József Mindszenty (1892–1975) was arrested for conspiring against the state in 1948 and sentenced to life imprisonment. After the Soviet intervention in Hungary, in 1956, he found refuge in the US Embassy in Budapest where he stayed for 15 years. See: Litvan G., ed. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Reform, Revolt and Repression, 1953–1963. L., 1996, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)